

PL305—Existentialism
Dr. Coleen Zoller
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E-mail: zoller@susqu.edu

Office: Bogar 24 (which is inside the PRCS department suite)

Office Telephone: 570.372.4163

Office hours: MW 2-3 P.M., TTh 2:15-4:15 P.M., and by appt.

"The unexamined life is not worth living for human beings." –Socrates in Plato's Apology 38a

*"There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night."
--Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus*

"Hell is...other people!" –Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit

Course Description:

In this course, we will pursue questions of the significance of human existence and modernity by exploring the works of European writers and thinkers associated with existentialism. Unlike other "isms", existentialism is not the name of a unified theory, movement or doctrine. Covering a variety of diverse and even incompatible approaches that unfolded during the 19th and 20th centuries, existentialism revolves around issues of meaning and meaninglessness, God and the absence of God, individual freedom and social responsibility, despair and affirmation, creativity and conformity, anxiety and calm. We will examine responses to these and other issues by reading and discussing some works of philosophy, literature, art, and film.

Course Objectives:

The general aim of a philosophy course is, as Kant wrote, to "have the courage to use your *own* mind!" More specifically, students in this course should:

1. Become more skillful in closely reading and analyzing philosophical texts in order to understand them as well as to evaluate them
2. Identify the fundamental questions, theories, vocabulary, and problems in existential thought
3. Identify and question their own beliefs about responsibility, God, and the meaning (or meaninglessness) of human life
4. Recognize that the questions and theories of philosophers are relevant and applicable to real-life decision-making in today's world
5. Debate effectively (in speaking as well as in writing), including: expositing positions, organizing thoughts logically, analyzing and evaluating evidence and arguments, accounting for a variety of viewpoints, and speaking directly to fellow students in class

Required Books:

Robert C. Solomon, ed., *Existentialism*

Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*

Elie Wiesel, *Night*

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*

Required E-Res Essays (print out your own copy and bring it to class):

Friedrich Nietzsche, excerpts from *Twilight of the Idols*

John Gatto, "The Seven Lesson Schoolteacher" from *Dumbing Us Down*

Films:

"Groundhog Day" (1993; Harold Ramis; 101 min.)

"Hannah and Her Sisters" (1986; Woody Allen; 103 min.)

"A Scanner Darkly" (2006; Richard Linklater; 100 min.)

Office hours: Please take advantage of my office hours to discuss any problems you have with the reading assignments, writing assignments, discussions in class, meaning of life, etc. Do not feel that you must have a carefully formulated set of questions to pose before you come to see me. The articulation of the problem is often the main stumbling block; so if something is an issue for you, don't hesitate to talk with me about it.

Grading: Your grade in this course will be based on the following:

Participation (includes reflection papers)	= 25%
Quizzes	= 25%
Term Paper	= 25%
Final Exam	= 25%

Course Requirements:

A. Reading and the Reflection Papers

"To read well, that is, to read true books in a true spirit, is a noble exercise, and one that will task the reader more than any exercise which the customs of the day esteem. It requires a training such as the athletes underwent, the steady intention almost of the whole life to this object.

Books [especially great books] must be read as deliberately and as reservedly as they were written." –Thoreau, *Walden*

One might mistakenly think that simply running one's eyes over the assigned reading means that one is prepared for class. This assumption neglects reflection. The way to get the most out of your reading and out of class is to spend time BEFORE CLASS *thinking about* each reading so that you will be prepared to answer fact-type questions (e.g., During which century did Kierkegaard write?) as well as evaluation-type questions (e.g., What do you think Nietzsche means when he says that God is dead?).

To assist in your reflection on the readings, each student must write a short reflection paper for each class for which a reading assignment is given. A reflection paper must:

1. state the main point of the reading (i.e., the main thing that the author is trying to say).
2. ask a question about the reading (make sure it is in the form of a question). This question should be an "unanswered question" by which I mean that it should be an interesting and *difficult* question (i.e., one to which there is no easy or obvious

answer). If, after stating the question, you can provide a simple, snappy answer to it, then the question is not a good one.

3. explain why your question is *interesting*, *difficult*, and/or *important to you* (not to me, not to your classmates, not de Beauvoir...just YOU!). Do **NOT** attempt to answer your question in place of this explanation, and don't choose questions that are not interesting to you.
 - These papers are due in class and **NO LATE PAPERS WILL BE ACCEPTED FOR ANY REASON EVER!**
 - Each paper must be clearly labeled to correspond to the reading (note the name of the author of the reading, the name of reading—books titles should be italicized, while article titles should be in quotation marks—and the pages numbers).
 - To do well on this assignment, it is important that you follow the directions strictly.
 - Reflection papers count toward the participation grade.

B. Attendance: All students are expected to attend *all* classes. If you must be absent, it is advisable to (1) either call or e-mail me *before* class to explain and (2) provide proper documentation of illness (note from health center), personal or family emergency (note from Dean of Students), or a required university event (note from coach/instructor). As detailed in the student handbook, missing four or more classes (including those that are "excused") shall result in failure of the course.

C. Class Participation:

1. My Assumptions:

- a. Every one of us is able to contribute something to our class discussions.
- b. No one knows everything.
- c. You are citizens (not consumers) at this university.
- d. Questions are just as important as comments.
- e. Expressing agreement with a classmate's comment is just as valuable as expressing disagreement.
- f. Coming to class unprepared is disrespectful to your peers who are prepared.
- g. Some of you are shy about speaking publicly.
- h. Some of you don't believe you can learn from class discussions with your peers.
- i. Those of you who take more time to ruminate sometimes resent students who appear to "shoot their mouths off."
- j. Some of you would prefer to be fed information directly by the instructor.
- k. Many of you wonder why this and other courses ask students to participate.
- l. Some of you wonder what exactly an instructor expects when s/he asks you to participate and how this will be graded.
- m. Laptop computers may be used in class only with proper documentation from the SU Health and Counseling Center.
- n. **Cell phones should be entirely silent and stowed in your bag for the duration of all class meetings.**

2. *Why participate?* There are two main reasons to participate in your classes. First, pedagogical research has demonstrated that students learn more when they actively participate in class discussions. Second, all students have a civic responsibility to offer their questions and thoughts so that the entire class can collaboratively learn the course material. Furthermore, participating in class will help you practice having thoughtful conversations outside of class.

3. *Class format:* The format of this class will vary from day to day, including all of the following: recitation “lectures”, conversations, debates, seminar. What I mean by recitation “lectures” is that when presenting new material, my presentation will include calling on students to elicit information about the readings. When class takes the form of a conversation I will ask students to discuss their responses to the texts and the issues they raise. Frequently there will be smaller group discussions—sometimes these will involve debating the strengths and weaknesses of theories and ideas, other times these will involve in-depth analysis of the day’s topic.

4. *Assistance:* As soon as possible anyone who feels ill at ease should discuss with the instructor ways of easing oneself into participation.

5. *Rubric:* A participation grade will be assigned to each student based on which of the following regularly applied to her/him:

F = not physically present, or *severely detracting from* classroom discussion (e.g., **sleeping and/or behaving in a manner that is disrespectful such as checking and/or sending text messages and/or failing to silence cell phones**)

D = present physically but not mentally and/or not being prepared, or *detracting from* classroom discussion (e.g., **regular mid-class bathroom trips, being unprepared, not having text and classroom supplies with you**, having side conversations, daydreaming, making totally irrelevant comments, etc.)

C = **present, alert, and prepared for class** (e.g., having read required texts in at least a cursory way, bringing text and classroom supplies with you to class, reflecting in advance on the day’s texts, **having written a reflection paper**, etc.), and **adding to the discussion but in only minimal ways**

B = present, alert, prepared for class (e.g., having read required texts with significant attention, bringing text and classroom supplies with you to class, reflecting in advance on the day’s texts, having written a reflection paper, etc.), and **contributing to class discussion (e.g., communicating some understanding of the text, asking related questions, sharing ideas, maintaining an appropriate balance of talking & listening, etc.)**

A = present, alert, prepared (e.g., having read required texts thoroughly, bringing notes, text--**with significant passages marked**--and classroom supplies with you to class, reflecting in advance on the day’s texts, having written a reflection paper as well as

some additional questions to ask to further the conversation, etc.), and **making thoughtful contributions to classroom discussion based on engagement with the texts** (e.g., communicating one's understanding of the text and the overall course, posing related questions to both the instructor and fellow students, sharing ideas and responding to the ideas of others, maintaining an appropriate balance of talking and listening, **applying course material to personal experience; actively engaging in one's own learning**, etc.)

D. Quizzes and Exams: There shall be six unannounced quizzes throughout the semester as well as a final exam. These will test your understanding of the reading material and what is covered in class. All quizzes and the exam will be cumulative. A missed quiz or exam earns a zero (unless permission for an alternative has been granted by the professor IN ADVANCE—and I do not automatically grant these requests). The lowest quiz grade will be dropped.

E. Writing:

Each student must write a formal philosophical essay in two phases in which one's own philosophical position is explained and defended. In this assignment you will need to demonstrate both your understanding and evaluation of relevant course texts. Details about this assignment will be announced well in advance of the due date. All papers must be submitted BOTH in hardcopy to me as well as in e-copy to turnitin.com. In advance of the due date you must set up an account (unless you already have one) at www.turnitin.com (the class ID # is 2333799 and the case-sensitive password is Simone).

Policy on Cheating, Plagiarism, and other forms of Academic Dishonesty:

All forms of plagiarism and cheating are prohibited. I follow the guidelines and University policy regarding the penalty for those identified as cheating or plagiarizing on exams and/or other assignments in this class (see the student handbook for maximum penalties and the definition of plagiarism). Students found to be cheating on assignments will receive an F for the course. I reserve the right to have all student written assignments submitted in an electronic format for the expressed purpose of checking assignments for plagiarism against internet sources (including pay-sites for papers) using turnitin.com. If you are in doubt as to whether or not any of your assignments for this class constitute cheating or plagiarism, please discuss this with me BEFORE turning in an assignment.

Students with Disabilities:

If you are seeking an academic accommodation, it is essential that you have appropriate documentation on file with the University and present that documentation to me as early as possible in the semester. If you believe that you have a disability but have no documentation on file at Susquehanna and wish to discuss what steps can be taken to determine whether an accommodation is warranted, please contact the Counseling Center for further information and assistance. Some additional information is available at <http://www.susqu.edu/counseling/disabilities/>.

Tentative Schedule of Topics and Readings:

Week 1, Day 1 (8/26) Introductory session

I. The Nineteenth Century

Week 1, Day 2 (8/28) Solomon, Introduction, pp. ix-xix and Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground* in Solomon, pp. 32-42

Week 2, Day 1 (9/2) Kierkegaard, excerpts in Solomon, pp. 3-31

Week 2, Day 2 (9/4) Nietzsche, excerpts in Solomon, pp. 43-78

Week 3, Day 1 (9/9) Nietzsche, excerpt from *Twilight of the Idols* (e-res)
Gatto, "The Seven Lesson Schoolteacher" (e-res)

Week 3, Day 2 (9/11) Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, pp. 31-72 (optional: pp. 1-29)

Week 4, Day 1 (9/16) Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, pp. 73-113

Week 4, Day 2 (9/18) in-class viewing of "Groundhog Day"

II. Early Twentieth Century

Week 5, Day 1 (9/23) Heidegger, excerpt from *Being and Time* in Solomon, pp. 93-116

Week 5, Day 2 (9/25) Marcel, excerpt from *Man against Mass Society* in Solomon, pp. 124-133

Week 6, Day 1 (9/30) Camus, excerpts in Solomon, pp. 173-193

III. Mid-Twentieth Century

Week 6, Day 2 (10/2) Sartre, excerpts from *Existentialism Is Humanism* and *Nausea* in Solomon, pp. 194-207

Week 7, Day 1 (10/7) Sartre, excerpts from *Being and Nothingness* and *No Exit* in Solomon, pp. 207-232

Week 7, Day 2 (10/9) de Beauvoir, excerpts from *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex* in Solomon, pp. 280-296

Week 8, Day 1 (10/16) Sartre, "Marxism and Existentialism" in Solomon, pp. 240-247

IV. Later Twentieth Century

Week 8, Day 2 (10/21) Wiesel, *Night*, pp. vii-xv and pp. 3-46 (optional: pp. xvii-xxi)

Week 9, Day 1 (10/23) Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 47-84

Week 9, Day 2 (10/28) Wiesel, *Night*, pp. 85-115 (optional: pp. 117-120)

Week 10, Day 1 (10/30) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. vii-xx, 1-21

Week 10, Day 2 (11/4) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pages tba

Week 11, Day 1 (11/6) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pages tba

Week 11, Day 2 (11/11) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pages tba

*Week 12, Day 1 (11/13) in-class viewing of "A Scanner Darkly"

Week 12, Day 2 (11/18) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pages tba

Week 13, Day 1 (11/20) Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pages tba

Week 13, Day 2 (11/25) in-class viewing of "Hannah and Her Sisters"

Week 14, Day 1 (12/2) Discussion of Berman's and Allen's films

Week 14, Day 2 (12/4) Final session: exam review

N.B. The final exam will be held in our usual classroom at the time and date scheduled by the Registrar's Office. The final exam schedule is available on the Registrar's website.

